

Telegraph Cable Operators Had A Dreary Life

(This account was published in 1890—Ed.)

There is something extremely weird about the lives of the men who work in the telegraph cable offices on the Eastern coast. They are the most successful of all telegraphers, for even the slightest errors in transmission would cause great trouble. Nearly all of the cable dispatches are in cipher, and as the operators cannot possibly understand the nature of the messages that pass through their hands, they must work in the dark, as it were. The cipher code is to them equivalent to an unknown language; it has no sense or meaning to guide the operator aright, and every letter, as it is formed by the instrument, must be transcribed upon paper with a mechanical exactness. The words are disconnected jargon, and the memory cannot be trusted to the extent of even a single word.

Ordinarily operators receiving commercial or press dispatches copy the commercial characters and words some distance behind the transmitter, the sense of the dispatch being then a guide to correctness in transcribing. There are telegraphers who, in receiving press news, copy from four to twenty words behind the sender. This is impossible with those who handle the cable messages. Every letter must go on paper the instant it is formed by the armature. To do this, requires a directness of attention, a concentration of thought, that is scarcely less than painful. As a rule, cables land at out-of-the-way places, and those employed on the work of interpreting the signals flashed under the ocean must spend their lives in what amounts almost to seclusion.

The cable office at Duxbury, Mass., is a good

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illustration of these conditions. There are eight operators who work on the cables themselves, and a similar number of men who man the Morse lines over which the cable news is forwarded to New York. In former times, before the adoption of the now perfected automatic machinery for receiving signals over the cables, the operators used to sit in a perfectly dark room. A mirror behind the instrument reflected the dots and dashes coming from beneath the armature like sparks. The operator, as each signal came, announced it in a loud voice and it was transcribed by a clerk in an adjoining light room. By the present method the characters are registered on tape and are transcribed by the operators themselves. As each dispatch is received it is recorded and is then passed over to the Morse operators, who forward it to New York. After the dispatches reach here they are distributed and forwarded to their respective destinations.

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The force of men at Duxbury is divided into day and night "tricks," four cable operators and four Morse men being on duty at all times.

In the winter all this is changed. Life out of doors is hardly endurable. The east winds blow fiercely over the waters, scattering the spray sent up by the angry waves as they beat upon the rocky shore, over the entire village. No raiment can withstand the penetrating power of an east wind laden with salt spray, and consequently the men of the wires at Duxbury remain under cover during most of the season. Days and weeks and months pass by, and all they can do is to listen to the clicking of their instruments when on duty, and the roar of the surf when they are at leisure. Of course, they read and study a great deal, but this becomes tiresome at times. Some of the men use their leisure in preparing themselves for other professions. Charles H. Thomas, an oldtime operator, became a thorough physician while working at Duxbury, and is now practicing medicine in Boston. Two other men became lawyers, and several are now expert electricians. This is probably the most valuable method yet discovered of "killing time."